Canada needs to up its game

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Body

"Canada is back, my friends."

Remember that?

Justin Trudeau was a newbie prime minister when he took the rostrum at the United Nations climate conference in Paris, circa 2015, proclaiming that his administration would act boldly to combat the climate change crisis both domestically and internationally.

It was an optimistic time. Not only for the way it pushed Canada back into a positive stance on the climate stage, but also for the framing of the Paris Agreement, which was signed five months later.

It fell to then-NDP leader Tom Mulcair to provide a reality check. "We need clear targets," Mulcair said at the time. "We need a plan to achieve them. We need timelines."

As Trudeau readies for his 26th UN climate conference, which gets under way next Sunday, Oct. 31, in Glasgow, it's worth remembering that the main target the Liberal government did embrace was a 30-per-cent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 from 2005 levels.

How many of us recall that the 30-per-cent target had already been pledged by Stephen Harper's Conservative government?

Only this past April did the Liberals up the ante, pushing the emissions reduction target to 40-45 per cent, using the same 2005/2030 framework. That's less ambitious than the European Union, less ambitious than Japan, and, if President Joe Biden gets his way, less ambitious than the United States.

Meaningfully, Canada's new target, which has been submitted to the UN summit as our new Nationally Determined Contribution, has been enshrined in law under the Canadian Net-Zero Emissions Accountability Act.

So that's all good then.

Well, hold on. The government's own data shows that Canada's emissions, measured in megatonnes, have bobbled around the 700 mark for more than a decade. Here's an irony: In 2005, the base year the government is using, emissions totalled 730 megatonnes. In 2019, the most recent year for which data is available, emissions totalled - wait for it - 730 megatonnes.

A scientific coalition called the Climate Action Tracker gives Canada an overall rating of "highly insufficient" in the context of the country's chances of meeting the goals of the Paris Agreement. That is, two degrees of warming at the outer limit, and preferably 1.5 degrees.

"If fully implemented, Canada's current policies are not enough to achieve this target and are only in line with 4 degrees Celsius warming," the group concludes. "For every step forward, Canada also seems to take two steps back" - notably, the continued expansion of pipeline capacity.

Steps forward include supporting the Global Methane Pledge, a move the government announced earlier this month. The goal there is a 30-per-cent reduction in global methane emissions by 2030. The government also announced a "commitment" to "developing a plan" to reduce Canada's oil and gas methane emissions by a whopping 75 per cent by 2030. Regulations are promised.

Without enforcement mechanisms, what hope is there that such a target can be met?

Just as you could say that without electric vehicle charging stations, there's no hope the promise of EVs can be met.

Six years ago, Justin Trudeau promised a great leap forward to a sustainable, low-carbon economy. He appeared so fresh-faced and optimistic up there on that stage.

Yet progress has been fragmented and often slow, with targets that don't keep pace with Canada's global peers.

Six years ago, the new PM made a point of paying homage to Indigenous peoples in his UN address. "Indigenous peoples have known for thousands of years how to care for our planet," he said.

"The rest of us have a lot to learn."

He could use that as a jumping-off point in Glasgow, telling the world what he has learned, and how he has worked with Indigenous people to achieve kinder-to-the-Earth outcomes. Canada should be a leader in the fight against global warming. But time is quickly running out.

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